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Contents

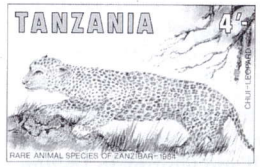
2 Record of Seed-set in an Endemic Kenyan Acacia (*Acacia thomasii*) *by Dino J. Martins and Anne Powys*

3 Reader Comments: Distribution of Hedgehogs

4 Life All Around Us - Annelids: worms with rings, *by Fleur Ng'weno*

8 Bird population estimation from frequency of capture at Nairobi Museum grounds *by George Amutete, Titus Imboma and Nicodemus Nalianya*

9 Checklist of the Common Birds of National Museum Grounds, Nairobi



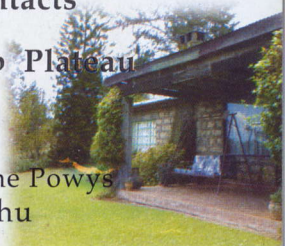
14 The Zanzibar Leopard: between Science and Cryptozoology *by Martin T. Walsh & Helle V. Goldman*

16 In Appreciation: Shirley Agnew, Alex Mackay, Thomas Odhiambo, Stuart Keith

17 The East Africa Natural History Society Committees and contacts

18 Time out - on the Kinangop Plateau

19 Bookstore



Cover photo *Acacia thomsii* by Anne Powys

Editor: Catherine Ngarachu

The Zanzibar Leopard between Science and Cryptozoology

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The Zanzibar Leopard, *Panthera pardus adersi*, is an elusive and possibly extinct subspecies endemic to Unguja (Zanzibar) Island. It has presumably been evolving in isolation from other leopards since at least the end of the last Ice Age, when Unguja was separated from the Tanzanian mainland by rising sea levels. The "founder effect" (genetic characteristics of the marooned population) and/or adaptation to local island conditions produced a smaller leopard than its continental relatives and one which "changed its spots", or rather saw its more numerous rosettes partially disintegrate into spots (Pakenham, 1984; Kingdon, 1989).

Not much is known about the biology of the Zanzibar Leopard. Visitors to the natural history section of the Zanzibar Museum will be familiar with the stuffed and rather faded specimen kept in a display case there together with an old black white photograph of a leopard trap. Apart from scraps of pelt furtively kept by hunters, to date we have only located five other skins: three in the Natural History Museum in London and two in the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Of these only one specimen in London and the two Harvard skins are accompanied by their skulls.

The Zanzibar Leopard's behaviour is also poorly understood. It has never been studied in the wild and the last time a researcher claimed in print to have seen one was in the early 1980s. Rural Zanzibaris' descriptions of the leopard and its habits are coloured by the widespread belief that an alarming number of these carnivores are kept by witches (*wachawi*) and sent by them to harm or otherwise harass their fellow villagers. This belief comes together with an elaborate package of ideas about how leopards are bred, trained, exchanged and sent to do the evil bidding of their owners. For local farmers this supplies a neat explanation for predation by leopards on livestock and humans, and more generally for their appearance 'out of place' in the vicinity of farms and villages (Goldman and Walsh, 1997).

The growth of human population and agriculture in the 20th century was largely responsible for this state of affairs, as people encroached on the habitat of leopards and the animals they preyed upon. Increasing conflict with leopards and the fear that this generated led to a series of campaigns to exterminate them. These were localised at first, but became island-wide after the Zanzibar Revolution, when a combined anti-witchcraft and leopard-killing campaign was launched under the leadership of Unguja's most famous witch-finder, Kitanzi. The long-term result of this campaign and the subsequent classification of leopards as 'vermin' was to bring them to the brink of extinction (Walsh and Goldman, 2003).

The available evidence suggests that when we began our joint research on the Zanzibar Leopard in the mid-1990s there were still a few of these elusive animals remaining (Goldman and Walsh, In press). Now we can't be so sure. Most zoologists think that this island leopard is extinct: indeed some of them already thought so when we began our joint study in 1996. This pessimistic conclusion scotched subsequent proposals for a conservation initiative targeting the Zanzibar Leopard: if they were gone or going then there wasn't much point in trying to do anything about it - apart from supporting the habitat conservation initiatives that were already underway on the island.

By contrast, the majority of people who live and work on the 'coral rag' lands of southern and eastern of Unguja, including government staff and conservationists, believe that the Zanzibar Leopard has not been completely exterminated. Claims of sightings abound, as do reports of other evidence for leopards' continued presence on the island and their nefarious use by witches. Many of these reports are difficult to evaluate and impossible to verify independently. So far none of the cases that we have investigated over the past two years (2002-03) has produced confirmation of a sighting or other leopard signs.

The recent scientific 'discovery' of the Zanzibar Servaline Genet *Genetta servalina archeri*, previously known only to islanders themselves, suggests that perhaps Unguja has yet to give up all of its zoological secrets. This small carnivore, another island endemic, was first described from an old skin and skull obtained in 1995. Its status was uncertain until a number of individuals were photo-trapped in January 2003 (Goldman and Winther-Hansen, 2003a; 2003b). If the Zanzibar Leopard survives, then similar standards of proof will have to be applied for any record to be acceptable to the scientific community. Otherwise most of us will get no closer to it than that faded museum specimen and those colourful cryptozoological narratives.

Acknowledgements
In addition to all of the people and institutions acknowledged in our original (1997) report, we would like to thank Daphne Hills in the Zoology Department (Mammal Group) of the Natural History Museum, London, and Judith Chupasko and Mark Omura in the Mammal Department, Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, for facilitating the examination and recording of specimens.

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* Pdf versions of these reports can be obtained from the authors on request.

Continued on next page

Information Request

The Zanzibar Leopard

We are continuing research and writing on the Zanzibar Leopard and the many issues that this case raises. We would very much like to hear from anyone who has any information about the island leopard and/or its products. We are especially interested in historical records from different periods, both before and after the Zanzibar Revolution, and including recollections of leopard hunting on Unguja Island and the fate of leopard skins.

Please e-mail us at one or both of our addresses. Any assistance will be gratefully acknowledged.

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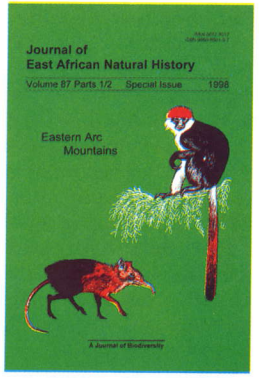
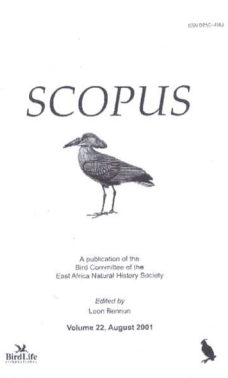
In Appreciation

In the past year the Society lost a number of members who dedicated a great part of their life to the study and conservation of natural history. For their life time work we acknowledge their extra ordinary contribution

Shirley Agnew
Alex Mackay
Thomas Odhiambo
Stuart Keith





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The East Africa Natural History Society

The EANHS is a long established Society, which startedthe first museum in the region. It was founded in 1909 to promote the study and conservation of nature in eastern Africa.

The EANHS operates nationally in Kenya (Nature Kenya) and in Uganda (Nature Uganda). These two organisations are taking action for biodiversity conservation through intervention at various levels: advocacy, monitoring, training, education and work with local communties.

The EANHS has a strong participatory tradition and members are active at in all areas of work. Listed below are the names and contacts of the annually elected Executive Committees and the contact persons and contacts for the many Committees and Projects that are active in conservation, research and education.

If you are interested in the work of any committee or project please contact the listed person or email office@naturekenya.org or nature@natureuganda.org

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The BirdLife Africa Division is based in Nairobi with offices at the International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE). You can reach them at birdlife@birdlife.org.ke